

The University of Chicago

THE SOUTHERN POOR-WHITE
A LITERARY HISTORY

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF
THE HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

1937

By

ARDREY SHIELDS McILWAINE

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6. Naturalistic Modes: the Gothic,
the Ribald, and the Tragic

After the publication of William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying in 1930 and of Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road in 1932, the Southern poor-white became the literary property of the naturalists. But the naturalism practiced by these authors does not conform exactly to the generally approved conception of this mode.

Vernon L. Parrington has formulated the best statement of the standard view.¹ Beginning with a definition of naturalism as "pessimistic realism," he enumerates six criteria: scientific objectivity; frankness about the whole man, hence the emphasis on three strong instincts: hunger, fear, and sex; amorality; deterministic philosophy; pessimism; and preference for three types of characters: physical brutes of strong desire, neurotics, and strong characters of broken will.

Contemporary Southern naturalism is marked off rather sharply in a few respects from the older method of Zola, Dreiser, and Norris. Faulkner in As I Lay Dying, while observing most of the naturalistic rules, has little to do with deterministic philosophy, which Parrington considered "the vital principle of naturalism, setting it off from realism"; in this book, the Mississippi author is concerned almost exclusively with the mind-flow of low intelligence. Nor can the works of Faulkner and Caldwell about poor-whites be regarded as entirely pessimistic. Caldwell's Jeeter Lester in Tobacco Road² and Ty Ty Walden in God's Little Acre³ are incurable optimists.

Despite such differences, these writers belong definitely to naturalism as much by virtue of their emphases on the so-called animal instincts, particularly sex, as by their conventional lapses from the naturalistic formula. For example, in Tobacco Road, Caldwell drops the objective viewpoint by criticizing a landowner for unintelligent management and by advocating "co-operative and corporate farming" as a means of saving Jeeter and

¹Main Currents in American Thought, Vol. III, Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1860-1900, pp. 323-25.

²Tobacco Road (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1932), pp. 20, 89, passim.

³God's Little Acre (New York: Modern Library, 1934), pp. 4, 12, passim.

other sharecroppers.¹ This is propaganda as bald as any in Dorothy Scarborough's In the Land of Cotton.

Creating in the naturalistic manner, William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell have made five additions to this history of the poor-white: (1) the frank representation of the sordid elements in these people, (2) the emphasis upon sex, especially in comedy, (3) the exploration of stupid poor-white minds, (4) the tragic concept of the poor-white, and (5) the first full-length portraits of poor-white men. All of these are, in effect, culminations and variations of earlier portraiture and all have definite connections with other contemporary work, that will be noted as each contribution is presented.

With the appearance of Faulkner's Sanctuary in 1931, the interest of these Southerners in the sordid evoked protest and distress in critical quarters. Mr. Henry S. Canby tagged Faulkner and other naturalists, "the School of Cruelty."² To some critics, the Mississippi author's characters were "the dregs of humankind,"³ "bad dreams of reality," and "creatures almost too sick or too depraved to be called human."⁴ And one reviewer thought that readers of Caldwell's Tobacco Road (1932) would "probably finish it . . . with disgust and a slight wretching."⁵

But these Southern naturalists are merely emphasizing a side of poor-white life that has existed both in fact and in literature for two hundred years. About 1728, William Byrd was amused at the squalor of the North Carolina (?) Lubbers; Caruthers pitied a diseased Tar Heel family; Mr. Stowe displayed the evils of slavery in filthy, starving squatters; and Simms found that poor-white degeneracy added to the viciousness of his villains. All of this before the Civil War. From the seventies through the nineties, the local-color period, addicted to the quaint and sweet, forgot about the brutalizing poverty of the po' buckra.

¹Tobacco Road, p. 83.

²Henry S. Canby, "The School of Cruelty," Sat. Rev. of Lit., VII (March 21, 1931), 673-74.

³Harry Hansen, Review, New York World, Feb. 10, 1931, p. 13.

⁴Anon., Review, Times (London) Literary Supplement, Sept. 24, 1931, p. 327.

⁵Anon., Review, Forum, LXXXVII (May, 1932), 10.

And in the twentieth century, the sensibilitists amplified some sordid details as impacts upon mind and heart.

Historically considered, the loudly condemned American sadism of Faulkner and Caldwell, as it applies to poor-whites, is merely a revival of the emphasis upon degradation, employed by Longstreet and a few others for humor, by the abolitionist for propaganda. Now it is used by these Southerners for fictional effects, both humorous and tragic.

And because of this difference in literary intention, Faulkner and Caldwell have created a poor-white world sharply set off from its earlier Northern prototype. The Abolitionists were concerned with sandhiller depravity only for its social moral; in short, the same motive that produced E. C. L. Adams' recent sketches, "The Carolina Wilderness,"¹ which depict the hates, violence, and lawlessness of South Carolina Crackers. Caldwell and especially Faulkner have raised the baser aspects in the life of the "low-down people" from propagandist illustration to the level of horror, and thereby earned for themselves another tag, "The Southern Gothic School."²

The novel, As I Lay Dying,³ and the story, "The Hound," both published in 1930, may be taken as examples of Faulkner's Gothic mode in which preoccupation with putrescence equals that of Shelley. The novel tells of the Bundren family's hauling the mother's corpse by wagon over forty miles to Jefferson, Mississippi. While they were fording a swollen stream, the coffin was soaked, the mules were drowned, and the leg of a son was broken. During the remainder of the journey, the corpse began to rot; buzzards wheeled on high; and the boy's leg became gangrenous. In "The Hound," Cotton, a murderer, jammed his victim's body head first into a hollow tree. Fearing detection from the howling at the tree of the dead man's hound and the buzzards' circling overhead, Cotton cut into the tree and pulled the body out--all except

¹Edward C. L. Adams, "The Carolina Wilderness," Scribner's Magazine, LXXXIX (June, 1931), 611-16.

²Ellen Glasgow, "Heroes and Monsters," Sat. Rev. of Lit., XII (May 4, 1935), 3-4.

³As I Lay Dying (New York: H. Smith, 1930).

one leg, just as the sheriff arrested him. In jail, Cotton babbled wildly: "It would a' been all right, but it started coming to pieces" ¹

But even greater heights--or depths--of such writing were reached in the sordid burlesque, "Savannah River Payday" (1931), ² by Caldwell. Around the Georgia sawmill, the countryside was foul with the carcasses of mules killed by overwork. Jake and Red started to town in a rattling Ford with the body of a Negro murdered on payday. Stopping on a bridge for water, they noticed the Negro's gold teeth, and knocked them out with a wrench. But when Jake claimed these treasures, Red mauled him over the head; "a ball of skin and hair fell in the dust"; and Jake was dumped unconscious into the back seat. Later they stopped and chased a Negro girl whom Jake felled with a clod, but she escaped while her assaulters quarreled. Red seized the girl's hoe and sliced Jake's "ear off close to his face. Jake fell back and felt the side of his face and looked at the ear on the ground." Then he bandaged his head with his shirt sleeve. In town, their engine "killed" by rain, they went into a pool room, leaving the carcass behind. A dog snuffed the body; the town marshal sent word to move the Negro "before he stinks up the whole town." "'Say,' Jake said . . . 'You go and tell that marshal that I said for him to take a long runnin' start and jump to hell Me and Red's shootin' pool.'" ³

But a more important feature of the Southern naturalists' preoccupation with the animal nature of poor-whites is their emphasis upon sex, especially for comic purposes. But, again, as with bestiality and violence, this "careless love" of the trash has been neither invented nor newly found; it has been rediscovered. Early in the eighteenth century, Colonel Byrd recorded with Restoration delight the amorous tussles of Lubber wenches with his surveyors; Joseph B. Cobb in Mississippi Scenes (1850) wrote of bawdy practical joking in the Lick-the-Skillet neighborhood; and in 1863, J. R. Gilmore showed Mrs. Bony Mulock bartering away

¹"The Hound," Harper's Magazine, CLXIII (Aug., 1931), 70.

²American Earth (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), pp. 85-87.

³Ibid., p. 97.

her husband's sexual services. But for nearly seventy years after Gilmore's slattern, no writer thought the sensual antics of the poor-white funny--or was prepared to say so. Indeed, the local-color period was so prudish that in literature the prolific trash became sexless and largely remained so until the twentieth century. From DeForest's lively bawds, Nancy Gile and Sally Hugg,¹ in 1871 to Alice French's "Headlights,"² twenty years later, there was not a whisper to indicate that the tackies might sometimes play fast and loose. Only with the work of the Kelley-Roberts-Green school did the revival of this part of poor-white existence begin.

And although this sexual emphasis of Caldwell and Faulkner is the usual one of naturalists and, at the same time, owes much to the sanction of contemporary taste, as well as to the writings of Anderson, Masters, and Joyce, it is historically the dramatization of poor-white sexual sins outlined by James R. Gilmore about seventy years ago in his essay, "The Sum of the Whole."³

Yet contrary to the popular impression of Faulkner, in the small number of his works about poor-whites,⁴ sex is not very important. Dewey Dell Bundren in As I Lay Dying, pregnant because of a cotton-patch rendezvous, interrupts the wagon trip with her mother's corpse to buy illegal medicines. Also with child out of wedlock, Lena Grove in Light in August⁵ wandered from Alabama to Mississippi searching for her "sawdust Casanova." But Faulkner does not dramatize the sexual experiences of these women.

¹In Kate Beaumont (1871). See Chapter III of this thesis.

²"The Mortgage of Jeffy," Otto the Knight . . . (1891).

³In Among the Guerillas (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1866). See Chapter II of this thesis.

⁴Through 1933, he had written only the story and the novel mentioned which had important poor-white characters. But note the Carolina clay-eaters used for viewpoint in "Fox Hunt," Doctor Martino and Other Stories (New York: H. Smith and R. Haas, 1934), pp. 27-51, first pub. in Harper's Magazine, CLXIII (Sept., 1931), 392-402; minor poor-whites in "Spotted Horses," Scribner's Magazine, LXXXIX (June, 1931), 585-97; and perhaps the half-wit Tommy in Sanctuary (New York, 1931); historical note on how a French pioneer's descendants became poor-whites in "Lizard's in Jamshyd's Courtyard," Sat. Eve. Post, CCIV (Feb. 27, 1932), 12-13, 52, 57.

⁵Light in August (New York: H. Smith and R. Haas, 1932). See her laconic reaction to her trouble: p. 480.

Not so with Erskine Caldwell. He appears, to William Troy, so absorbed with sex or the "ecstasy of the animal" that his characters are divested of all things human: "What each of them is reduced to finally," he thinks, "is a kind of abstraction from the human to the animal and even farther from the complete animal organism to the single instinct."¹ This opinion can be maintained for some characters, but it is a short-range view. Historically, the important fact is that Erskine Caldwell has developed a long-neglected side of poor-white life, which, narrowed and bestialized by poverty, is of necessity strongly motivated by the instinct of sex, as well as those of fear and hunger. And, in the second place, by writing of the sensuality of Georgia Crackers as comedy, he had added to American literature a sort of humor that Mark Twain might have written had he dared.

In this sex comedy of the poor-whites, two stories by Caldwell tell of promiscuity among itinerant field-hands, a theme and a group last used by Alice French, forty years ago, in her story, "The Mortgage of Jeffy."² But from this story, Caldwell's two narratives: "The Strawberry Season" (1931)³ and "Picking Cotton,"⁴ differ sharply. Whereas Miss French devotes herself to the wages of "Headlights" sinning--just as Paul Green does to-day--, Caldwell is interested in the easy sexual ways of these foot-loose farmhands as they affect the emotions of two small boys whom he makes the narrators. In "The Strawberry Season," the boy cannot forget how Fanny cried when he put a berry down the front of her dress and slapped it hard. The adolescent in "Picking Cotton," enraged at Gertie for boasting of her end-of-the-row woods-trysts with men pickers and for her teasing him with sex riddles, beat her and crammed her mouth full of cotton. Both stories, strongly reminiscent of Sherwood Anderson's "I Want to Know Why," represent the gap between local-color like that of

¹William Troy, Review, Nation, CXL (Feb. 15, 1935), 192.

²In Otto the Knight (1891).

³American Earth, pp. 3-9.

⁴We Are the Living (New York: Viking Press, 1933), pp. 89-94.

Miss French and the naturalistic mode.¹

These sex stories, however, with the pathetic note of adolescence about them are not in Caldwell's characteristic vein --a vein which is marked by drollery and what Horace Gregory calls "idiotic gravity."² Like Faulkner's Dewey Dell,³ Caldwell's tenant folk regard sex as irresistible. With them, it is not a question of shall or shall not, but of when and how. Accepting the urgent necessity of sex, they are tolerant of others' philandering; oblivious to the inhibitions of more squeamish people, they, like the folk of the ages of Chaucer and of Charles II, can enjoy the game of sex without self-consciousness. By so representing the Georgia Cracker, Caldwell had been able to approximate the fabliau more closely than any other American writer.

The finest single example of this humor in Caldwell is the story, "Meddlesome Jack" (1933),⁴ which Carl Van Doren, with justifiable enthusiasm, calls "a bawdy masterpiece."⁵ It is a tall yarn about "the meanest looking jackass" that had ever been seen on a certain Georgia countryside and how his braying threw all things female into idiotic frenzy. White women, black women, and mares--all acted alike when the jack, galloping about, sawed the air with his rasping cry.

Long ago, European authors employed this theme of the sexual stimulation of humans by the behavior of animals; but American taste has only recently altered enough to make possible Erskine Caldwell's rare tale of the poor-whites and the meanest-looking jack. In 1926, Faulkner had written: "We have one priceless universal trait, we Americans. That trait is our humor. What a pity it is that it is not more prevalent in our art."⁶ Such yarns as this one and others of Caldwell, along with

¹For example, with a modicum of the description used by Miss French, Caldwell gives both scene and poor-whites with far greater actuality.

²Review, Books, Feb. 21, 1932, p. 4.

³As I Lay Dying (1930), pp. 23-24.

⁴We Are the Living, pp. 95-114.

⁵"Made in America: Erskine Caldwell," Nation, CXXXVII (Oct. 18, 1933), 445.

⁶Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles (New Orleans: Pelican Bookshop Press, 1926). Foreword; no paging.

Faulkner's own "Spotted Horses," have done much to return our humor to strong native channels.

But the "idiotic gravity" of the poor-whites, which only Gilmore in his portrait of Mrs. Bony Mulock and DeForest in his sketches of bureau life had caught, Caldwell has exaggerated and applied to sex with excellent effect. In Tobacco Road, Jeeter Lester, having sold his daughter, Pearl, to Lov for a wife, discussed sagely with his son-in-law the problem of the girl's refusal to sleep with her husband;¹ Ty Ty Walden in God's Little Acre, watched raptly by lantern light his daughter, Darling Jill, and an albino in amorous toil;² and Vic Glover in "August Afternoon" fumed and did nothing about his new wife sitting on the front steps and enticing a "yellow-headed sapsucker" who whittled confidently under a tree.³

Through the poor-white⁴ by the hand of Caldwell the fab-lisu accent has re-entered American literature.

The third important advance made in the depiction of the poor-white by the naturalistic method has been the exploration of low-intelligences. Before the studies of Faulkner and Caldwell almost nothing had been done in this direction. The incidental use of woolhats in fiction made the probing of their minds superfluous. Ben Pickett's idiot daughter in Simms's Richard Hurd, half-witted Bud Stucky in Harris's "Azalia," and simple-minded Sion Alford in Green's "The Field God"--all are merely objects to be seen and pitied. The practice before the twentieth century had been either to stay outside the Cracker's mind or to attribute to him thoughts and emotions suitable for almost anyone. For instance, Thomas Nelson Page provided Little Darby with the mental equipment of any high-souled Virginian. And the sensibilitists in the twentieth century have concerned themselves primarily with the sensitive minds of exceptional tenant women.

Thus it remained for Faulkner to study the slow, dull

¹Tobacco Road, chap. 1.

²God's Little Acre, pp. 137-39.

³We Are the Living, pp. 143-57.

⁴For similar sex-comedy of Georgia about 1830 in a novel, a compromise between naturalism and sensibility, see John Fort's God in the Straw Pen (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1931), pp. 28-29, 192-93.

wits¹ of poor-whites in a series of inner-monologues which make up his novel, As I Lay Dying. In it, for the first time, we follow the twilight minds of an entire family: Mrs. Addie Bundren, the dying woman, who had been decent before marrying a poor-white; Anse, her lazy, stupid husband; and four children: Cash, simple but capable with tools; Darl, an idiot; Dewey Dell, a slow-witted, sensuous girl; Vardaman, a normal child; and Jewell, the result of Addie's illicit relation with a preacher, and, therefore, a brighter person than the other children.

But Faulkner's method of revealing the stream-of-consciousness in such inarticulate humans is even less representational than Miss Roberts' dialect or imagery. Witness the feelings of the young boy, Vardaman, described in words like "integrity" or "co-ordinated whole,"² or the thought of Cash, while cobbling his mother's coffin, that "animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress [of a coffin] come slanting."³ Much of the content of these inner monologues is undoubtedly modernistic trickery; but, on the other hand, Faulkner has made an attempt to convey a sense of the callousness, limitation, and, at times, strange acuteness of poor-white minds. And so well has he succeeded, that through the thoughts of various persons the character and story of Anse emerge with uncommon reality. He was the first important Southern poor-white to appear in contemporary American fiction, even though he is far less completely realized than Caldwell's Jeeter and Ty Ty.

Anse was a sight to behold: his collapsed, toothless face had the "appearance that old dogs have,"⁴ and his eyes were "like pieces of burnt-out cinder."⁵ A shiftless procrastinator, he had brought his wife to her deathbed from field-work and from worry over his laziness. Now as she was dying, Anse cursed his ill luck, the hardness of God's ways, and longed for a set of false teeth. When Addie finally stopped breathing, Anse thought: "God's

¹By 1926, E. J. O'Brien noted the beginning of a shift in the short story to "the more difficult task of eliciting and defining the inarticulate emotions of those who have been dimly defeated by American life." Introduction to Barry Benefield's Short Turns (New York, 1926), pp. vii-viii.

²As I Lay Dying, p. 53.

³Ibid., p. 77.

⁴Ibid., p. 14.

⁵Ibid., p. 28.

will be done Now I can get them teeth."¹ Yet Addie had dominated his weak mind for so long that he could not deny her last request to be buried at Jefferson, forty miles away. This sworn duty to the dead so possessed him that he mortgaged everything he had to complete the journey. Once Addie--already somewhat rotten--had been put underground, Anse quickly got his false teeth and then another wife before the family started homeward. Since this was Anse's first trip to town in twelve years, he thought best to provide for the future.

The life of Anse suggests several aspects of poor-white mentality as presented by both Faulkner and Caldwell: first, the tendency of limited minds to obsessions; second, a marked insensitivity; and third, a somewhat paradoxical acuteness, perhaps better--sensibility. Anse Bundren can think only of getting Addie buried and Cash of nothing except carpentering. Caldwell's Jeeter Lester has a mind overwhelmed by the longing to farm; and gold-fever² causes Ty Ty Walden to dig his farm full of deep pits.

The deadening of normal emotions from dire poverty receives its most extreme illustration in Tobacco Road. Not only are the Lesters without family feelings or sympathies; they show a queer insensitivity toward people physically deformed. Ellie May Lester, a hare-lipped girl, cried and ran when the other Lesters talked about her slit mouth. And Bessie, the cracked-brained preacher, whose nose had no bone in it, was forever clapping her hand over her wide-open nostrils, for "Dude had once said that when he looked at her nose it was like looking down the end of a double-barrel shotgun."³

This callousness in ordinary human relations, however, is balanced somewhat by a paradoxical sensibility in both Jeeter and Ty Ty, which relates them to the characters of Miss Roberts and her sort. As dead as Jeeter's emotional nature is in some respects, he has a fine, primitive sense of the ground not inferior

¹Ibid., p. 48.

²Cf. the gold-fever among Mississippi poor-whites: "For sixty years three generations of sons and grandsons . . . had turned the original surface, time and again, hunting for the [supposedly hidden] gold and silver." Wm. Faulkner, "Lizards in Jamshyd's Courtyard," Sat. Eve. Post, CCIV (Feb. 27, 1932), 12.

³Tobacco Road, p. 58.

to that of Ellen Chesser or of Miss Cather's Alexandra Bergson.¹ And Ty Ty possesses a sort of mystical knowledge of the living beauty in man. It is from these virtues that the ironic tragedy of these two Crackersprings.

To present adequately the last two contributions of the naturalistic mode: the tragic concept and the remaining pair of full-length studies of poor-white men, the characterizations of Jeeter Lester and Ty Ty Walden must be placed in historical perspective.

It has taken two hundred years of writing about the poor-white to produce Jeeter Lester. In 1932, when he appeared as the chief character in Tobacco Road, there was no completely adequate portrait of a man from his class in American Literature.² Longstreet's Ransy Sniffle and Taliaferro's Ham Rachel we glimpse for only a short while in their sorry careers; and Smith's life of Bill Arp is anecdote and synopsis rather than a complete fictional recreation. But not so with Jeeter; for, although Caldwell concerns himself with only the last few weeks of this Cracker's existence, by cut-backs in the story, he has been able to relate the history of three generations of Lesters from the time of the original settlement on Tobacco Road to the death of Jeeter. And in God's Little Acre (1933), Ty Ty Walden, the second life-sized creation of the trashy Cracker, established Caldwell as the foremost interpreter of the poor-white.

But not only were Jeeter and Ty Ty the first satisfactory novelistic "heroes" from the trash; they were the first tragic poor-whites. Before them, there was merely the pathetic and the near tragic. Caruthers had drawn his still-life of a destitute Tar Heel family with pity; Trowbridge's heart went out to weak Dan Pepperill in his sufferings in Dudjo's Cave; and R. M. Johnston in "A Surprise to Mr. Thompson Byers"³ wrote with moist eyes of the idiot boy, Sandy. These and many other writers,⁴ North and South, before and after the war, came no nearer the tragedy

¹O Pioneers! (New York, 1913).

²Miss Glasgow's Nick Burr (Voice of the People, 1900) and Abel Revercomb (Miller of Old Church, 1911) rise out of their class by early manhood.

³Lippincott's Magazine, XLVIII (July, 1891), 74-82.

⁴See Chapters II and III of this thesis.

of poor-white life than to pity its miseries. Just one Southerner in one story went further. In the life of Mrs. Feratia Bivins in "Mingo" (1880), Joel Chandler Harris realized that he had tragedy, but he apologized for this old crone as a tragic figure and lapsed into sentiment. The creator of Uncle Remus was all heart.

Much nearer the tragic conception of Caldwell was the work of the Northern writer, John W. DeForest. In his story, "The Independent Ku Klux" (1872), he conceived his poor-white, Selnarten Bowen, in burlesque and irony. For Selnarten, initiated into the K.K.K. in mock ceremony, started on a career of comic thievery which ended in murder and surrender to the law. In this yarn, DeForest used elements that with starker handling, more sympathy, and less burlesque, were to be used by Caldwell in creating his two master-portraits. Besides these nineteenth-century hints toward tragedy, in the present century, Miss Glasgow and Miss Scarborough preceded Caldwell with their stories of self-made heroes in defeat. But these were hardly anticipations; only the romantically diluted determinism of Miss Scarborough pointed toward Tobacco Road. And the hankering after something higher in the works of Paul Green and the other sensibilitists has little in common with the longings of Jeeter and Ty Ty.

The truth of the matter, then, seems to be that Erskine Caldwell's tragic conception of his Georgia Crackers is original. For, in it, he has compounded all of the elements used before his time and given to the fusion the peculiar marks of his talent and of the naturalistic licenses of the time. And so, over two centuries after Colonel William Byrd had watched the Lubber leaning on his snake-fence, Caldwell introduces us to Jeeter Lester on Tobacco Road, not to ridicule him as the Virginian would have done, but to show the irony and tragedy of his lot. The story of this old Cracker is one of determinism, both hereditary and economic.

In Georgia, Jeeter Lester was starving to death on the worn-out sandhills of Tobacco Road. For nearly eight years he had not farmed. That meant no credit for rations or snuff. And now that his cow had died and his old Ford would no longer rattle to Augusta with a load of almost unsaleable blackjack wood, he was desperate. People watched him so closely that stealing food seemed impossible. As a result of all these things, Jeeter and his family had existed for the past several days on boiled meat

rinds and corn pone.

Nor was there any hope of farming or of getting work to do along Tobacco Road, because the whole section was an agricultural graveyard, the ghost-land of two crops. At present, many years after it had been exhausted by tobacco, it was abandoned by the absentee owner as unfit for cotton. Out of pity, the landlord allowed Jeeter and other share-croppers to remain in the shacks rent-free until the miserable hovels should rot down. Across the field, grown up in broomsedge and scrub pines, could be seen wrecks of long-unused tobacco barns and deserted tenant houses. And everywhere red gullies cut the land and even Tobacco Road.

Still Jeeter would not move elsewhere; he expected any day to borrow a mule, find credit for guano, and start a cotton crop. But meanwhile, the Lesters in their struggle to escape starvation sank to the lowest poor-white level. Even the Negroes passing along Tobacco Road stared, silent and amazed, at the Lesters as if seeing some new form of life.¹ Nor did the blacks ever lower themselves by speaking; and they knew "white folks." Certainly, the Lesters were a simple, if not weak-minded lot. Jeeter had few brains, and Ada, his wife had fewer. Indeed, during most of her married life of forty years, she had been silent. Dude, Ellie May--perhaps all of the seventeen Lester children were hare-brained. And not one of them could read or write.²

With so little of brain to provide either will or foresight, Jeeter, along with his family, in the struggle to eat became a beast, driven by hunger to live and then by sex to "please himself." In such a dog-eat-dog existence, he had lost all morality and family sense. He sold Pearl his twelve-year-old daughter to Lov for a wife; the price was seven dollars, a gallon of cylinder oil, and some quilts. Jeeter hated his mother, a pellagra ridden sack of bones, for living so long. To him she was "nothing more than a door-jamb," and whenever he could keep her from eating he did so. Nor did Jeeter have a mite of fatherly kindness. Through the years, he had sworn that he would have Ellie May's hare-lip sewed up. Now he faulted God and made the girl cry by his talk.

¹Tobacco Road, pp. 36-37.

²Ibid., pp. 81, 88.

I don't believe He done the right thing by her [Jeeter said] when He opened her lip like that. . . . What use is a slit like that for? You can't spit through it, and you can't whistle through it, now can you? It was just meanness on His part when He done that. That's what it was--durn meanness.¹

Cut off by poverty and degeneracy from the countryside diversions of decent folk, he found little delight except in sex. Rebuked for his bawdy life by the bawdier preacher, Sister Bessie, Jeeter at once dilated.

I used to be a powerful sinful man in my time. I reckon I was at one time the most powerful sinful man in the whole country. Now, you take them Peabody children over across the field. I reckon clear near about all of them is half mine, one way or the other.²

Just as the Lester shack could not rot and sag further without falling, so Jeeter and his family could not sink lower--and live.

How he had fallen to such degradation was the story of the Lesters over a hundred years. The whole section around Tobacco Road had been owned and cleared by Jeeter's grandfather, a prosperous grower of the weed. Half of this original tract was willed to Jeeter's father, who quickly lost most of it, because he raised only cotton--and less of that every year. Then Jeeter inherited what land there was, debts, and a mortgage. The few acres left after the settlement slipped away from Jeeter, for, he, too, was a one-crop farmer, pouring into the loose, sandy land more and more guano that the rains promptly washed out. Thereafter, a share-cropper on the old Lester land, he farmed in the same way, until the discouraged owner sold the stock and left him to starve.³ This decline through two generations of the cotton-growing Lesters constitutes a Southern type-history, a parable of the poverty crop. It is also a naturalistic sequence of economic

¹Ibid., p. 70.

²Ibid., p. 71.

³Ibid., pp. 83-87. This entire chronicle is placed into the novel as an interlude of propaganda. See also Jeeter's experience with the loan companies; pp. 147-49. J. D. Wade's opinion that "the protracted economic depression of the Southern farmer is in each of the Caldwell books set morally somewhere distressingly close to Wall Street's own front doorstep" is simply not true. "Sweet are the Uses of Degeneracy," Southern Review, I (Winter, 1936), 457. Cf. briefer account of how a French pioneer's descendants became Mississippi poor-whites: Wm. Faulkner, "Lizards in Jamshyd's Courtyard," Sat. Eve. Post, CCIV (Feb. 27, 1932), p. 12.

and hereditary determinism. Stupid, undiversified farming produced poverty; poverty brought filthy living and ignorance; ignorance and filthy living caused depravity, both physical and moral.

But this is neither all of the parable nor all of Jeeter's story. Despite this old Cracker's degeneracy, he had one redeeming passion that, properly guided, might have saved him; he was a fool about farming. He scorned being a "durn woodchopper," and as for moving to the cotton mills as many another share-cropper was doing:

"No! By God and by Jesus, no!" Jeeter had said. "That's one thing I ain't going to do! The Lord made the land, and He put me here to raise crops on it. I been doing that, and my daddy before me, for the past fifty years, and that's what's intended. Them durn cotton mills is for the women folks to work in."¹

And the county poor farm--that place would never see him.² He would rather starve than leave the Lester farm--"my land," he called it. And home ground it was, only more; it was to Jeeter "the good earth." For he had an acute awareness of the power in the soil. In the spring, his nose was the first to catch the smell of plowed fields miles away, and he loved to feel the winds off them "going down inside of his body."³

Yet this one redeeming passion of the old Cracker was denied: he had nothing with which to farm. Hence, late February days, when fields were to be burned over for plowing, made Jeeter restless and miserable.

I sort of want to cry . . . [he said]. The smell of that sedge-smoke this time of year near about drives me crazy. Then pretty soon all the other farmers will start plowing. That's what gets under my skin worse. When the smell of that new earth turning over behind the plow strikes me, I get all weak and shaky.⁴

¹Ibid., p. 151. Jeeter's hatred of cotton factories represents the last stand of the old agrarian stock against the exodus to mill-hill. Some of Jeeter's children had run away to the spindles: *ibid.*, pp. 217-19. Cf. Edwin De Leon's statement: "It would be difficult to explain to a stranger the horror the Southern men and women . . . entertained for the cotton factory and its life and labors." "Ruin and Reconstruction of the Southern States," *Southern Magazine*, XIV (June, 1874), 568. See Paul Green's anticipation of Erskine Caldwell in using the tenant-and-the-mills theme: "Bread and Butter Come to Supper," *Wide Fields* (1928), pp. 232-44.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 204-05. This queer pride of the Southern poor-white J. W. DeForest noted nearly seventy years ago. See Chapter III.

³*Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 21.

This longing he could not down, so that every year he had burned over his land, hoping that somehow he could break ground.

One February after firing his fields, Jeeter went to bed, "smelling the aroma of pine and broomsedge smoke in the night" and swearing that he would get up the next morning, borrow a mule, and plow his land for the first time in eight years. Before sun-up the wind shifted, blowing the flames toward his dry tar-dripped cabin. At mid-morning he and Ada were two charred corpses in a bed of hot ashes.

Ironically enough, the good in Jeeter had led to his destruction.

Ty Ty Walden in God's Little Acre has much in common with Jeeter. Both are dominated by obsessions: Jeeter to farm, Ty Ty to find gold. For "close on to fifteen years," Ty Ty had been digging his farm full of pot-holes, and the gold-fever still had him steaming. Like Jeeter before forced to stop sharecropping, he was a trifling farmer. Instead of cultivating his land, he kept his two sons deep in the red-clay gold-pits, while two lazy Negro croppers made sorry cotton. Completely absorbed in digging, Ty Ty forgot to feed his workers until Black Sam threatened to eat his landlord's mule to keep from starving. Once Ty Ty and his family barely escaped starvation by securing a loan from his son, Jim Leslie, who had prospered in a mill-town nearby. Known far and wide as a gold-fanatic and shabby farmer, Ty Ty was no longer respected,¹ not even by Jim Leslie whose pocketbook he was forever trying to open. Moreover, in his sexual nature, he is even closer to Jeeter. The naughty curiosity of an old lecher, past his days of potency, afflicted them both. And their code of sex is the same as that of the Negroes² which in turn was very nearly that of the dogs.

Nevertheless, Ty Ty is not another Jeeter. Even the traits which they share are somewhat different, and in others Ty Ty is sharply set off from his predecessor. He is honest, humane, and

¹Despite Ty Ty's superior economic level contrasted with that of Jeeter there is no doubt of his being a poor-white. Jonathan Daniels: "one of the finest studies of the Southern poor white." Sat. Rev. of Lit., IX (Feb. 18, 1933), 437. Cf. Caldwell's foreword to the Modern Library edition of God's Little Acre already referred to in the introduction to this work.

²God's Little Acre, pp. 44, 278.

religious according to his lights. Had he not set aside "God's Little Acre" for his Lord? And while both he and Jeeter are senilely obsessed by sex, Ty Ty possesses a mystical sense of its beauty. Simple and foolish old Cracker though he is, Ty Ty, like Whitman and D. H. Lawrence, knew the cleanness and beauty of the procreative act as a living principle in man.¹ And his joy in this certainty brought about his tragedy.

Confident that he had the key to man's happiness, Ty Ty evolved a way of living which was a queer jumble of mysticism and free love. He would have none of the preacher's doctrine of duality: God against the flesh and the devil. "A man," he claimed, "has got God in him from the start."² And this divinity in man the old Cracker thought he recognized in sexual love. "If there's anything in the world He's crazy about," he declared, "it's seeing a man and a woman fools about each other. He knows then that the world is running along slick as grease."³ To try to keep a man or a woman "all for yourself" is to invite "trouble and sorrow the rest of your days."⁴ Hence, it is a man's duty, as he told his prospective son-in-law, Pluto Swint, to make Darling Jill "so pleased she'll leave off with everybody but you."⁵

In his glorification of what to him was the beauty in life, Ty Ty lauded the prowess of his family, vowing that "it takes a Walden to make the girls all wrought up."⁶ He was thankful that the good Lord had blessed him "with three of the prettiest girls a man ever had in his house."⁷ But his pride in the beauty of his daughter-in-law, Griselda, brought about his tragedy. Her perfect body so amazed old Ty Ty that he spent all his spare time snooping about to spy on her. And whenever possible, he launched into a paean of her loveliness. "It's a wonder," he mumbled, "that God ever put such prettiness in the house with an onery old cuss like me."⁸ But when Ty Ty went with Griselda to borrow money from his son in Augusta, he praised her to the wrong man. Jim Leslie had a diseased wife who "looks like she's all

¹Ibid., p. 200, 260-61.

²Ibid., p. 299.

³Ibid., p. 270.

⁴Ibid., p. 299.

⁵Ibid., pp. 23-24.

⁶Ibid., p. 184.

⁷Ibid., p. 298.

⁸Ibid., p. 43.

mashed down on the chest and can't rise up."¹ Later, Jim Leslie came to take Griselda by force out of his father's house and was shot by the girl's husband. To foolish old Ty Ty had come the thing he dreaded most of all. "I reckon," he once said, "I'd just fold up and die if I saw blood spilled on my land. I'd never be able to get over the sight of it."² It was also tragic irony that his praising Griselda's beauty had caused one son to kill another, not merely on his land, but on God's Little Acre. Therefore, the immediate tragedy of Ty Ty came from perverted idealism, the product of his weak, gentle mind, not from economic pressure as was the case with Jeeter. By mixing God and poor-white promiscuity³ into a sort of private religion and by becoming the evangel of it, he destroyed his own happiness.

Finally, what may be said of the naturalistic contribution? By virtue of their additions to the literary chronicle of the sorriest Southerners, Faulkner and Caldwell have given these folk their most important literary existence. The creation of Jeeter would alone warrant such a verdict, for thereby the Southern poor-white became established in contemporary literature alongside of Babbitt and other American types. Jeeter Lester is to the poor-whites what Uncle Remus is to the Negroes--a name for his class.

¹Ibid., p. 171.

²Ibid., p. 201.

³For a lurid tragedy of sex in a Louisiana swamp, full of half-breeds and poor-whites, see Evans Wall's No-Nation Girl (New York: Century Co., 1929). It is a sub-literary mixture of local-color and attempted naturalism; yet as a color-line study of isolated poor-whites, it has significance. See the dedication: "To Lyle Saxon who knows the truth of the types and scenes presented in these pages"

CONCLUSION

Through somewhat over two centuries--from William Byrd's History of the Dividing Line (1728) to Erskine Caldwell's Tobacco Road (1932)--the literary history of the Southern poor-white has been tracked and explained in four periods.

In the Colonial era, Byrd recorded humorously the origin of the poor-white as frontier Lubber along the Virginia-North Carolina border--an indolent, shiftless wretch, bedeviled by vermin, agues, and the "country distemper" from eating unsalted pork.

From the early 1800's to the Civil War, the Lubber emerged in literature as the poor-white, variously dubbed Cracker, wool-hat, dirt-eater, or tackle. Having received the attention of only travel writers and historians in the eighteenth century, he now was placed in novels as a minor character and in short sketches of humor as "the whole show." The Southern novelists in the plantation tradition largely ignored him, although Caruthers in The Kentuckian in New York (1834) pitied him and Simms used him as a villain, achieving the notable portrait of Bostwick. Humorists in the South, however, from Longstreet to Charles H. Smith, employed the trashy Cracker with excellent effect and produced the most important interpretation before the twentieth century. In fiction, the major treatment of him occurred in the North where abolitionists displayed him in minor roles as a living indictment, economic and moral, of the planter class.

During the local-color age (about 1870-1900), the poor-white came into the main rôle of short stories and general consideration in one novel, Cable's Bonaventure (1888). Besides this gain in fiction, the range of literature about the po' buckra was expanded both in geographical setting and in types. Indeed, the work of authors like Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, and Cable so firmly established him as a pathetic regional type, worthy of understanding, that the tradition of the Cracker was passed on vividly to the twentieth century for yet another literary emphasis.

Beginning around 1900, the swelling stream of writing about the sorriest Southerner, once a Lubber, then a poor-white,

and now a tenant or sharecropper, reached a crest in the vogue of the twenties and early thirties. In Miss Glasgow's fiction during the early years of the century, he entered the main roles of novels; by 1923, the poor-white woman had at last the same consideration in Edith S. Kelley's Weeds; and with Harold Williamson's "Peggy" (produced in 1919, published in 1922), closely followed by the work of Paul Green, the lowest Tar Heels came into drama. The profusion of sketches, short stories, novels, plays--everything except poems--was so varied that nearly every sort of previous writing about the trash reappeared with time-differences. There were, however, two outstanding advances in the fiction of sensibility and naturalism--modes which have apparently exhausted the literary possibilities of the tenant farmer as he now exists. Through these two schools, the mind, degeneracy, and tragedy of the poor-white were completely presented.

But in addition to such a running account of the steadily augmenting literature about poor-whites, a view of these characters from all over the South moving down to our time will, more than any other means of presentation, reveal the variety, continuity, and near-completeness of this American chronicle.

In 1728, Colonel Byrd watched the Lubber--the original poor-white--resting his lazy life away along the Dividing Line. Just after the Revolution, Bostwick, squatter and "white Indian," did the dirty work for Tory Negro stealers during South Carolina's first reconstruction; and later in the great days before the Civil War, Nancy Gile and Sally Hugg gave "treats" in their old-field cabin to which planters went when on the loose. Up in the Old North State, Mrs. Bony Mulock, who had a "durn dight d'ruther chaw," was blackmailing her husband into a cash settlement. At Georgia musters, Bill Arp and O. J. G. stamped about, the crowing bullies of the drill ground; and once the gouging and fighting got under way, the dirt-eater, Ransy Sniffle, began whooping it up and tearing about like a fice dog. Down in Mississippi, Bob Bagshot was such an amorous and violent cut-up that his pranks kept the whole Lick-the-Skillet neighborhood in a stew. That lanky sharper, Simon Suggs, wandered and swindled in Alabama, while Ham Rachel staggered home from Eufala to his "diggins" with two jugs of the "good critter" slung over his shoulder. At his lonely Virginia cross-roads shack, Jimmy Gordon stealthily traded liquor to slaves for stolen goods.

Then came the Civil War. Some of the Crackers delighted in playing war; but Tim Mills got tired of the game and hied back to Hometown in the Virginia pineywoods. There he skulked about the woods as Long John was doing in Florida. But "Little Darby," a sorrier Crockett of the Old Dominion, discovered his true forte in battle and died a hero's death. Across the mountains in the Tennessee foothills, weak Dan Pepperill tried to remain neutral while helping a Union family secretly, only, after being flogged, to weaken and join the C.S.A. Far to the South the illiterate Cajuns were hauled off to a war and a world they knew not of.

After the surrender, when Ku Kluxery was abroad, Selnarten Bowen, a pig-stealer, tried to join the Klan to carry on his thievery. Later, one picnic day in Georgia, Mrs. Feratia Bivins poured out to her guest the bitter story of her sufferings at the hands of an aristocratic planter family. In the same state, Emma Jane Stucky and her half-wit son, Bud, hovered around the village of Azalia depending upon charity for the meager existence of their kind. About the Black River country in Arkansas, "Head-lights" roved with her band of wandering cotton-pickers, carousing and fighting. While in Louisiana, the sorry Cajun, Arsene, wheedled his perique tobacco and café noir from the planter's store and forgot about his crop. But not all of the poor-whites were trash. Once the South began to be developed commercially and business broke down class lines somewhat, it was possible for Nick Burr to become a Virginia Lincoln and occupy the governor's mansion of his state.

By the twentieth century the tenant system of the South was pressing all hope out of the descendants of happy Crackers like Ham Rachel and Bill Arp. Year after year in Kentucky tobacco fields, Judy Pippinger and Ellen Chesser slaved to no purpose and found peace only in a stoical acceptance of their lot as tenant wives. Likewise, Peggy Warren's dreams of escaping North Carolina cotton fields and tenant cabins and going to the city were blasted. Deep in the Florida wilds, the "white Indian" Mart was at last overtaken by society; the squatter and trapper could no longer hide out from the world. Across forty miles of Mississippi roads, simple, degenerate old Anse Bundren hauled and finally buried the corpse of his wife. But on Tobacco Road in Georgia, Jeeter Lester reached the dead end of the sharecropper's row.

For several reasons this literary record of the poor-

white stretching away from Lubberland to Tobacco Road has been worth telling. It has thrown light upon the period-attitudes which affected the successive portraits of the Cracker; it has shown the unfolding of his literary possibilities as a subject; and by various culminations, it has accomplished what a history should do in providing a better comprehension of the present--in this case, the contemporary vogue of the poor-white in fiction. To know Jeeter Lester and his literary forebears is to understand not only a rich body of indigenous writing but a class of people that vitally concerns all thinking Americans.

